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SUBJECT: GOMA NOTES 03/26/08 - BRIEFING IN BENI

REF: Kinshasa 283

11. (SBU) Summary: MONUC assesses the situation in North Kivu's Grand Nord region as much calmer than that further south near Goma. Combat is occurring only between PARECO and FDLR/RUD forces southwest of Lubero, with relatively limited disruption. There is a significant presence of foreign armed groups in the region; FDLR/FOCA is particularly well-integrated into the local community. Reliable estimates of these groups' numbers remain elusive. MONUC has established bases at Kokola and Kanango to pressure FDLR positions. Many FARDC troops have been moved out of the region, and the three battalions that remain are not prepared to undertake meaningful operations against the FDLR. End summary.

12. (SBU) Lt. Colonel Santosh Nair, commander of MONUC forces based in Beni in the Grand Nord region of North Kivu, led a staff briefing for USAID Liaison Officer March 26, 2008 about cease-fire violations, negative forces and the general state of play in the region. Highlights of that briefing follow.

Overview

13. (SBU) The overall situation is much calmer than further south in the Goma hinterlands of the Petit Nord. No Goma process ceasefire violations have been recorded, with the exception of the FARDC tank movement south from Beni (reftel). This is primarily due to the fact that no Congolese armed groups are currently facing off against each other. Active or semi-active combat is occurring only between PARECO and the RUD faction of the FDLR, southwest of Lubero. This is producing new IDPs and disruption. Ex-combatants, many of whom have not been properly reintegrated, are floating around cities and major towns, and are a source of instability. However, this is a chronic, rather than acute, problem.

"Negative forces"

14. (SBU) There is a significant presence of "negative forces" in the Grand Nord. Foreign armed groups include:

-- ADF/NALU. East and northeast of Beni toward the Ugandan border. They avoid contact with MONUC and the FARDC so MONUC is not certain of their precise location. They have also reportedly moved to areas east of Butembo. MONUC estimates they number 400-500 and are 60 per cent Congolese. They use North Kivu as a sanctuary, and have no economic interests in the DRC. They do not harass or brutalize the local populations in areas they are occupying. They are quiescent at this time and are not mounting any armed offensives in Uganda.

-- FDLR/FOCA. West of Lubero, extending down to north of

Kanyabayonga, and farther south to near Rwindi. There is also a pocket south of Lake Edward in the Virungas. They are fully in charge of the areas they control, providing security, administration and tax collection. They are firmly integrated into the communities and getting along with their lives in a fashion that would be judged to be normal if they were not armed and organized as a fighting force. They do not brutalize or harass the local population, and have perhaps 1,000 men under arms (light weapons, mortars and rockets.) FOCA has a lock on the area around Fatua, where gold mining is king. Gold -- not Congolese francs or dollars -- is the medium of exchange. FOCA take 8 per cent of all commercial transactions, payable in gold, as taxes.

-- FDLR/RUD. Southwest of Lubero, west of Kanyabayonga. Less radical than FOCA. Still led by General Mushaere.

15. (SBU) Congolese armed groups in the Grand Nord include:

-- PARECO (La Fontaine). Southwest of Lubero, spread out but concentrated between Bingi and Buniatenge. Claim to have 1,000 fighters, but MONUC estimates 150-200, including many minors. Currently involved in clashes with RUD.

-- Vurondo Mai-Mai. Southwest of Beni and northwest of Butembo, near the town of Vurondo. Seems to have split into three factions: General Baraka faction -- small, with 15 officers; Vurondo faction, "riffraff," in MONUC's characterization; Hundule faction -- 10 officers. (Note: This is not the story told us by Mai-Mai spokesman Didier Bitaki and Colonel Mbusa Ndime, the latter from the Vurondo Mai-Mai. End note.)

-- Rwenzori Mai-Mai. West bank of Lake Edward in the forest. They apparently moved to this area around the time of the Goma conference. In MONUC's assessment, not a real group. They cannot produce any fighters when asked to do so. (Note: This tracks with Bitaki's assessment. End note.)

-- MRC. A big question mark. Unconfirmed rumors place them in the Grand Nord, but if they are, they have less than 100 men under arms and are east-northeast of Beni. It is not clear whether the group, if it exists, is loyal -- or not -- to Nkunda.

-- CUDTE/ACOA. Same questions, same general area.

Goma and Nairobi processes

16. (SBU) Nairobi process:

-- MONUC has established a mobile operating base (MOB) at Kokola and a helicopter operating base (HOB) at Kanango to put pressure on FDLR positions in the Grand Nord.

-- FARDC has only three battalions in the region, which are not prepared to undertake any meaningful operations against the FDLR. Many troops have been moved to the Petit Nord, and others are in training in Nyaleke.

-- FDLR deserters average one per week from RUD and zero from FOCA.

17. (SBU) Goma process: there do not seem to be any major issues in the Grand Nord.

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